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Robert Kieft, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Brandon Nordin, and Steven C. Wheatley, "Scholarly Societies, Scholarly Publishing, and the New Information Ecology" (2013). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315332>

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Scholarly Societies, Scholarly Publishing, and the New Information Ecology

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The following is a transcription of a live presentation at the 2013 Charleston Conference. Slides and video are available online at <http://bit.ly/1gnpaBm>.

Robert Kieft: Thank you, everyone, for joining us this morning. I am Bob Kieft from Occidental College. Surely you do not need to come to Charleston, South Carolina, and attend this conference to know that wherever you are on the great chain of publishing, being from author to archive, that all of the other links in the chain are abuzz with opportunity and challenge these days. Our remit on this panel is to discuss publishing as it looks today from the point of view of scholarly societies and the 300-year-old-plus tradition that such societies bring with them to the variety of services and purposes for which their members band together. I am going to introduce our three panelists, and Anthony [Watkinson] will moderate the question session again. In order of speaking, I would like to introduce Brandon Nordin, Vice President for Marketing, Sales, and Digital Strategy at the American Chemical Society. Second will be Steve Wheatley, Vice President of the American Council of Learned Societies, and third, representing my own scholarly society, the Modern Language Association, is Kathleen Fitzpatrick who is the Director of Scholarly Communication, the first, I think, director of scholarly communication at MLA. So, Brandon.

Brandon Nordin: Thank you. As you heard, I am Brandon Nordin. I am the Vice President of Marketing, Sales, and Digital Strategy for the American Chemical Society's publishing arm, ACS Publications. We are now obviously on the threshold of a new era and paradigm in publishing. Many details are unclear, and all markets are not going to move at a similar pace, but I think for societies in particular, while there are obviously challenges in the transition, the opportunities outweigh the difficulties. That, I think, is because the new information economy

breaks a logjam in the marketplace and engages the research funder community directly. It has the opportunity to recapitalize the output of science and engineering fields, to help assist the library budgets that have not kept pace with the growth in output, and, again, I think the fundamental issue here is that we are in a boom economy for education, particularly STEM graduate education. We are a boom economy for science funding, especially when you look at this as a global scale, not just in the US; the rise in output is significant and no library's budget has kept pace to deal with that.

These are just some quick background numbers on ACS, and as I look at those, I especially look at the change between 2000 and 2010 when ACS, like many publishers, went through the big digital jump, and I see double- to triple-digit increases in published articles, in cited research, and in usage. For all the challenges we have in the library community today and all the discussions about pricing and who pays for what, I think we should also recognize that we have lived in a golden age of scholarly publishing where more people have greater access to more scholarly information than ever thanks largely to library-managed subscription resources. The long phase shift that will occur, we believe, between subscription only and open access and the mixed article economy that is a result is due to the transition of OA from a relatively narrow concept, talked about and implemented by few across the universe of scholarly publishing, to an activity practiced by many largely due to funder mandates. One of our challenges today, though, is that there are buzzwords galore and that there are few consistently applied and understood standards. This is perhaps a good thing. Innovation requires a certain amount of flexibility, so I would urge that we encourage experimentation and curb litmus tests. Publishers, users, authors, and libraries are

all in this together, and it is going to take us a while to sort this out.

So what are the implications for societies, libraries, and the research community? Firstly, I think that the search for talent on the editorial side, on the reviewer side, for authors will propel increased competition, and publishers that have deep ties to the community and reciprocal loyalty back will have a natural advantage here. That sounds to me like society publishing. We are also going to need to understand our end-user customers and work more closely with them in a more holistic way, in particular to understand what role they are consulting our resources for today and how they are reacting to us. I think, in many cases, our scholars are also students, teachers, active researchers, and reviewers. We do not know when we have poor tools in managing the many hats they wear and relationships as they work with us.

Our identity as organizations will also have to become more global. On one of my first international trips with ACS when I joined 5 years ago, I was meeting with some libraries in France and talking about growth opportunities, and they said, "Well, you have a lot of possibilities, but you have two challenges. One is American and the other is Chemical." In terms of looking at our growth, I think societies overall have tended to be sort of bounded by either their disciplines or their locations more so than commercial publishers. All of this is going to bring a shift in the emphasis engaging the end-user community. It means the publishers are going to have to build muscle memory in understanding how they interact with customers and how to deliver value at the multiple touch points. The key to this is frequency, and again, I think this is an area where society publishers have a real benefit because they are already dealing with scholars, with students, and with researchers in their roles as editor, reviewers, and authors.

However, I think from a system side, this is going to be a challenge, and this is something that publishers have not done well. A lot of information is locked up in different silos. You know, at ACS, for example, the customer numbers we use are completely different and in a

completely different system than the customer numbers that our ACS affiliate uses. So in many cases, it is very difficult for us to be able to understand what the total spent within the organization is, for example, or how a user is interacting with both systems. The cost of managing these types of system changes is going to be large. It is also going to require, I think, an even larger culture change as well as technical skill to manage.

How do societies prepare for the new information economy? Well, the first thing, of course, is societies must, and have by a large point, crossed the digital divide. They need to go global. They need to improve technology in shared services, offer increased collaboration, increase their outreach and education, and use that to develop more integrated and improved customer knowledge. At ACS, we have seen a tremendous increase in our global reach through our digitization program. In 2007, we declared the online article the article of record, and really restructured our business around that. We invested in digital-first production methodology to speed time to market as well as lower operating costs and launched a new digital delivery system that set the standard in the industry. We shifted our pricing and product offerings to reflect this move to online accessibility and decreased cost per title. As a result, our customer base has increased 30%, and most libraries now subscribe to 2 to 3 times the amount of content that they did previously. By 2012, our relatively small collection of 44 titles have generated over 80 million COUNTER downloads. Perhaps more impressively, the high quality and widespread accessibility of our journals drives 1.6 million citations a year, which leads the chemistry category. We are a global publisher. Again, this is an area which I think will be an interesting transition point for societies. Our membership is 80% North American, 20% international. Our author base, our usage, splits out much more: 30% to 40% US and the rest split almost equally now between Europe and Asia.

Technology improvements from platform enhancements to back office systems is a significant step in realizing the next stage in

publishing, and then ultimately integrating your content and customer repositories, especially across the multiple silos that exist in a publishing market. At ACS, we have four divisions, and there are several areas which we would typically call our “publishing assets,” but there is a tremendous amount of content that is not integrated into any delivery or discovery system that we should be looking at. I think, again, one of the biggest challenges we are going to find in the most immediate future is the fact that most of our authors really do not understand and have really not been following, to the same degree that library and publishing communities have, a lot of the debates around open access and new publishing models, and it is going to require a fair amount of education and stimulus to do so. Overall, as a publisher, we have been testing methodologies for the last six or seven years. Initially, we launched in 2006 our articles and request program which gave every author that publishes with ACS 50 downloads through author-directed links. Our member access program gives 168,000 members 25 additional accesses as part of their membership. These are millions of dollars of additional unsubscribed access open to the community. We have just launched four new programs around author choice, which is essentially an author pays model, both an immediate as well as 12 month. We have also offered an ACS-certified deposit that is aimed at relieving the author and the library a lot of the administrative overhead of tracking submission and compliance with funder mandates. Perhaps most importantly, though, we are launching a full or pure open access journal, *ACS Essential Science*, with no author or subscription fees as well as introducing ACS author awards. This is a \$60 million stimulus to the open access market; certainly in the sciences where we will offer every author that publishes with ACS in the next year a \$1,500 credit towards any purchase of any other publishing service over the next 3 years. This is a way that helps current researchers with current budgets that were not aware of encroaching funder mandates to have a transition plan from the traditional publishing model to a pure open access. I think that is my time, so thank you.

Steven C. Wheatley: Well, Bob invoked the 300-year-plus history of learned societies, and I am not going to go back that far, but my tribute to history will be to speak only from a text and without PowerPoint. I will go back more than 100 years and begin with a story from when the research university was still a new growth in the United States. William Rainey Harper, the first president of the nascent University of Chicago, was aggressive in recruiting star faculty to his new campus. He would offer blandishments including one relevant to our topic this morning. If Harper really wanted someone, the president would promise the wavering scholar that he, and it was almost always a “he” in those days, would be the editor of not one but two new journals that the university press would publish: one, a journal for academic specialists, and the second, for the general public. This strategy soon proved to be budgetarily unsustainable, but we can admire the twin goals of building both scholarly rigor and public enlightenment. Now, modern learned societies, the sort that I represent, emerged at the same moment as the new universities, and these two institutions together have shared the project of enacting the idea of research. This morning I want to talk about learned societies in the humanities as they confront the changing climate of scholarly communication. Today, executive directors and presidents of humanities scholarly associations must ask themselves, “To what question is open access the answer?” To help understand their thinking, I will provide a few general framing comments and then consider how the issues bundled in the move to open access affect these societies.

So, first, what do we mean when we talk about learned societies in the humanities and interpretive social sciences? The ACLS has 71 members, and they are a pretty diverse group. But, to over simplify, they roughly fall into three categories: large disciplinary societies, interdisciplinary societies, and subdisciplinary societies. The disciplinary societies are what most people have in mind as the ideal type of learned society. About 15 of our 71 societies are in this category, including all of the major social science societies, but our largest member is the Modern Language Association with more than 28,000

members, followed by the American Historical Association at 15,000, and the American Anthropological Association at 11,000. But a disciplinary society can also be pretty small. The Linguistic Society of America has 4,800 members. The American Musicological Society has 2,000. Most disciplinary societies have a staff of anywhere from three to 30 full-time employees, and they maintain the flagship journals in their field. They take responsibility for setting scholarly standards in the name of their disciplines, and their meetings are the site of job markets in those areas. Then there are interdisciplinary societies. The best known of which are those in area studies, Latin American studies, Asian studies, African studies. But we also have temporal interdisciplinary societies: Eighteenth-Century studies, Seventeenth-Century studies. The larger of these do have a professional staff but the smaller do not. Then there are, and this is probably more than half of our membership and more than half the number of learned societies out there in the world, smaller subdisciplinary societies. In our case, the International Center for Medieval Art or the Society for French Historical Studies. They have membership in the hundreds, very thin staffing, and perhaps no paid staffing at all. Their executive director is a faculty member who may get some modest course release, or is maybe doing it entirely on his or her own time, yet all of these societies have journals, and most of them have editors and editorial boards.

Now all our societies, and I think all societies in the sciences as well, are essentially voluntary associations. They are voluntary in the sense of who does most of the work on committees and councils, and they are voluntary in the very nature of membership. You do not have to join. You can be quite a distinguished historian and never go to a meeting of the AHA. Yet societies attract members because they provide a vital horizontal linkage across institutions. Members are united by common interests. Learned societies were formed as social networks before the term was coined, and they have democratic governments, a chief elected officer, and a president who governs with an elected council. But these officers are elected, by and large, for their scholarly achievement and imminence and not for their business acumen or

their familiarity with the dynamics of scholarly communication. Now, most of our societies both large and small have roughly the same business model: a three-legged stool of membership dues; conference registration, including conference revenues, such as exhibition fees; and publications. Publications are mostly journals, although some have monographs, most of which lose money; most of which have reference works, which make money. Almost all of our societies feel themselves to be extremely fragile financially. They live close to the margin of their operating income. Only a few have modest reserves or endowments and rarely more than \$1 million. Now, each leg of the stool of this business model is very uncertain now. Societies worry about membership in relation to the changing demographics of faculty and the declining portion of the teaching force on the tenure track. They worry about conferences and meetings with the vagaries of airline fares, the zeal for reducing everyone's carbon footprint and not flying about, and the declining university budgets for travel. I do not have to explain to this audience why publication revenues are unpredictable. All societies are looking for new means of revenue and new means of strengthening the basic value proposition they present to potential members. I know Kathleen [Fitzpatrick] will have more to say on that point.

Scholarly societies are all about peer review in the broadest sense. They were created to name and claim an area of knowledge and to establish and monitor standards for cultivating that area. Establishing a peer-review journal was the most obvious way of doing that but there are many other ways. Prizes for books and articles, even the elections of officers themselves. Most humanities journals have two types of peer review: prepublication review of research articles and postpublication review of books and other published materials. That is a very essential part of their mission because postpublication peer review counts tremendously in subsequent stages of peer review such as tenure cases and funding competitions.

Now, most society publications make money, but not a lot. A recent study of eight journals in the

humanities found that, in 2007, they had about \$6.9 million in costs and \$8.4 million in revenue. So that would come to less than \$200,000 per journal if all the costs and revenues were distributed equally. Subscriptions, I cannot say this clearly enough, to journals in the humanities and interpretive social sciences are cheap. The price of institutional subscriptions to both the online and print editions of the *American Historical Review* varies from \$365–730 depending on institution size and research productivity. *American Anthropologist* costs \$550 a year. *PMLA* is priced at \$210 a year. The transactions of the American Philological Association can be had for \$175 a year. Subscription revenues from institutions and individuals roughly equal the cost of production, so the surplus revenue comes largely from advertising and royalties. Almost all the surplus goes back to societies, and the degree to which you think of learned societies as part of the academic enterprise, this may be thought of as money that the scholarly system pays itself. Given the limited size of most scholarly society budgets, these modest revenues are essential.

This is the framework within which learned society leadership considers the proposition I mentioned earlier: to what question is open access to humanities journal the answer? Is it the answer to strains on library budgets? As I noted earlier, humanities journals are cheap. They are what the Harvard librarian describes as sustainably priced. I would suggest that it takes a fairly absolutist, even Manichaeian, lens to suggest that any price is a predatory price. Is open access the answer to how learned society accomplishes its mission? It can be. Promoting humanistic knowledge as a vital component of a healthy, broad society, is integral to their being, but only if the society still has the means to accomplish that after instituting open access. All of our members are experimenting with different adaptations. The Latin American Studies Association, for example, has made its publications free to IP addresses based in Latin America. Some societies are experimenting with an open access regime of some journals while maintaining subscription revenues for others. More and more, they are adopting some version of green open access

allowing authors to retain rights and post their work on their own web site or institutional repositories. Could gold open access, the author pays model, work in the humanities? It could if we had more gold, but I am here to tell you that we do not. The boom Brandon just mentioned in the sciences has passed us by. ACLS funds a lot of scholarship, and we award \$15 million in fellowship and grants, but if recipients of our fellowships use stipends to pay author fees that would be trading publication costs for research time. The National Endowment for Humanities, its funding is now 29% of its peak appropriation, and an additional 49% cut has been proposed, and the House Budget Committee is considering complete elimination of all funding. If the author pays model were widely adopted in the humanities, it would increase the already problematical level of inequality in academia. Wealthy universities could pay for their faculty but scholars at public universities and smaller colleges could not expect such largesse.

So to conclude: Can learned societies in the humanities pull off William Rainey Harper's trick? Can they have the means to identify, celebrate, and publish scholarly public excellence while also promoting the broader circulation of new knowledge? I am optimistic they will, but there will be more experimentation and adaptation. Let us hope they do, for where there is open membership in democratic governance, learned societies provide one of the most powerful solvents for the growing stratification of higher education. Thank you.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick: You are going to hear a lot of echoes in what I have to say today of Steve's remarks, which perhaps should not be surprising. I am the Director of Scholarly Communication of the Modern Language Association, which I have just found out recently is actually the largest, if you think of scholarly societies as distinct from professional organizations, we are the largest scholarly society in the world. The MLA, as you might imagine, is popularly seen as a pretty conservative organization and, insofar as that is true, it is for pretty good reasons. The association's mandate over the last 130 years has included furthering the values of careful,

deliberative, scholarly thought in a culture that often seems to prize speed and underconsidered notions of progress above all else. On the other hand, as Abby Clobridge noted in her review of the National Academy of Sciences public comment meeting on public access to federally funded research, the Modern Language Association was the lone publisher to offer full support for a new model for scholarly communication. How did we at the MLA come to this position and how are we working strategically to imagine the future of our publishing and communication activities? I am happy to have the opportunity to share with you today some of our thinking on these issues.

Since the Royal Society of London, learned and professional societies have been created precisely in order to help facilitate communication amongst members, scholars, and between those members and the broader intellectual world. Now, early on that communication took place via meetings and letters that were sent among the membership between meetings. Over time, the meetings developed into regularly scheduled conferences, and the letters were gathered into systematically produced and distributed journals. Those journals accrued a series of formal publishing processes including, of course, editing and peer review that came to mark them as authoritative resources for developing knowledge in their fields, and those resources came not only to be valued by their original audience, the members of the society, but also by a broader range of scholars, researchers, and students. As a result, research libraries collected those journals and made them available to their patrons.

Now this was, by and large, a system that worked. Scholars join societies in order to gain access to the resources and conversations that those societies made available. Societies were supported in their work not only by those members, but also by libraries whose subscriptions extended the reach of those resources. The funds that were generated through membership dues and subscriptions enabled the societies not only to fulfill their mission of facilitating scholarly communication, but also to do other kinds of work on behalf of their memberships, including advocating for the field

within institutions and, on the national and international scene, supporting members in developing professional practices in standards, and so on. Joining such a society was what professionals did, and scholarly communication was what scholarly societies were for.

Now, things have changed over the last several decades, however, and the development of new technologies for communication is only one of those changes. Scholars' professional lives have become increasingly precarious as employment conditions in colleges and universities have dramatically weakened. As a result, an increasing number of scholars are unable or unwilling to commit the ongoing resources to professional societies that they feel cannot sufficiently assist in meeting their core needs. University and research libraries' budgets have been strained by the need to maintain often exorbitant subscriptions to journals sold by commercial publishers. As a result, those libraries are decreasingly willing and able to help support the not-for-profit societies to which the scholars at their institutions belong. Societies find themselves straining under declining membership levels, increasing publishing costs, and diminishing subscription revenue. As a result, many societies have turned to commercial publishers as a means of sustaining their communication programs and supporting their other functions. But those publishers, of course, have a very different sense of mission from the scholars, libraries, and societies among which they mediate.

Now, into this already complex set of competing interests and needs, enter the Internet and, in particular, the World Wide Web. The web was, like scholarly societies, invented for the express purpose of supporting communication amongst researchers by allowing them to create pages on which they could share their work with one another and with the world. The difference, of course, is that the web permits any individual scholar with server access and a little bit of technical knowledge to share their work directly and immediately further diminishing their apparent need for those collectives that scholarly societies have historically provided. As a result of these tensions, recent discussions about open

access have been beset by misunderstandings, some intentional and some unintentional. Many scholars fear that open access will result in a chaos of self-publishing without any peer review, despite the fact that open access is perfectly compatible with peer review and that new modes of review for openly published work are being developed. Many societies argue that open access is financially unsustainable and that it will destroy the business models on which they have relied, when, in fact, a range of new models for open access publishing are coming into being. On the other hand, many people believe that open access publishing can be done for free. While it is true that the costs of reproduction for scholarship online trends toward zero, significant cost of production remain. As a result, arguments around open access and the future of scholarly communication tend to wind up in a stalemate of sorts with the various constituencies involved talking past rather than with one another. Now, we at the MLA strongly believe that this need not be so. We all: scholars, libraries, societies, and the broader public, share the goal of increasing the wealth of knowledge that we hold in common, and if we focus on that collective goal, a viable path might be carved out.

There is still reason for some benefits of membership in a scholarly society to be exclusive to the society's members. There is still value provided in the editorial work done by a scholarly society in producing authoritative research records but, like scholars and libraries, societies must begin to grapple with the shifts in value that have been created in and around the Internet. All of the changes in the profession that I discussed earlier, including the casualization of academic labor and the severe constraints imposed on library budgets, require us to contemplate the possibility that the locus of a societies value proposition in the process of knowledge creation may be moving from selling access to certain

research products to instead facilitating the broadly open distribution of the work done by its members. Now, this is a profound shift and not just for societies, but for their members. The scholarly society may, in coming years, operate under a model in which, rather than becoming a member in order to get access to the society's products, one instead becomes a member in order to get one's own work out to the world surrounded by and associated with the other work done by experts in the field. The value of joining a scholarly society in the age of open public web-based communication then may be in the ability to participate in that communication.

For that reason, we at the MLA have recently launched MLA Commons, which is a platform on which our members can collaborate with one another, can participate in group discussions, and can share their work openly and freely with the world. The platform is also enabling us to consider new ways of using our more formal publications to better fulfill our mission making as much of our work as freely available as possible while still providing for the organizations future sustainability. With that goal in mind, we have recently moved our journal profession onto the Commons where it is open to any interested reader, though membership is required in order to respond. We want to work with our members in the coming years to develop a new set of structures, new professional practices, and new standards that work with such open publicly accessible communication, including new forms of editing and new forms of peer review. We are committed to the idea that the role of the scholarly society in the years ahead will be to support those new practices, to promote the work that is being done by our members, and to help create the broadest possible public understanding of the importance of that work for our collective future. Thank you.